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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7437
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5575
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4060
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1437
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4113
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 0284
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3202
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8034
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5653
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0413
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2361
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: MUSLIM LEADERS VOICE CONCERNS ABOUT LAND RIGHTS
AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REF: A. COLOMBO 1106

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 977

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: On October 2, Ambassador hosted prominent Muslim leaders for a roundtable discussion on Muslim issues to mark the holy month of Ramadan. Participants noted the absence of Al-Qaida and other radical Islamist terror groups but expressed concern about a growing Wahhabi presence, and the need to address social problems within the Muslim community before radical ideas begin to resonate with the youth. Participants expressed concern about land rights for Muslims in both the Eastern Province and the North-Western Province. Despite historically good relations with both Hindus and Buddhists, Muslims now face some resistance to their activities, even in Colombo. For the most part, however, they remained optimistic about relations between Muslims and both Sinhalese and Tamils and confident that Sri Lankan Muslims would remain moderate and peaceful. Ambassador assured the Muslim leaders that the U.S. is paying close attention to religious freedom and other concerns raised during the discussion and regularly encourages the GSL to listen to and address the concerns of the Muslim community. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On October 2, Ambassador hosted prominent Muslim leaders for a roundtable discussion on Muslim issues. Participants included Principal of Zahira College T.K. Azoor, former Attorney General Shibly Aziz, Chairman of the Muslim Peace Secretariat A.M.M. Faaiz, and Chairman of the Islamic Center of Sri Lanka M.H. Mohamed.

Wahhabi Influence Growing

[1](#)3. (U) Participants noted that Islam in Sri Lanka has traditionally been both moderate and peaceful. Lately, however, they observe a growing Wahhabi presence, based

mostly in the town of Kattankudy in Eastern Province. Fortunately, they said, there are not yet any "jihadi" groups present in Sri Lanka. Muslim leaders have made a point of teaching youth to "shun this path." They expressed a concern however, that if social problems within the Muslim community are not addressed, radical ideas may begin to resonate. The growing influence of the Wahhabis has led to intra-religious tensions and increased intolerance of minority Muslim sects such as the Sufis.

Concerns About Land and Property Rights

¶4. (U) Participants expressed concern about land rights for Muslims. They are being pushed by "both sides" (i.e., Sinhalese and Tamils) in the East, they said. Earlier, the LTTE took Muslim lands, and now, the Sinhalese are working to reduce the presence and influence of Muslims in the East. In the North-Western Province town of Puttalam, thousands of internally displaced persons from the early 1990s remain in camps, mainly Tamils evicted by the LTTE from Jaffna. Many are unable to get land for housing or obtain business licenses.

Facing New Levels of Discrimination from Buddhists

¶5. (U) Historically, Muslims have had good relations with both Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. According to some participants, however, the Sinhalese community feels threatened now and is reacting against Muslims. In Colombo, they said, there is resistance to construction of new mosques. They are unable to obtain permits to build, and if

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they use homes as mosques, neighbors complain. They noted that the Government is using policies such as a proposed new noise ordinance to limit Muslim activities. Under the new law, they would not be allowed to issue the call to prayer over loudspeakers.

U.S. Sensitive to Muslim Issues

¶6. (U) Ambassador assured the Muslim leaders that the U.S. is paying close attention to the concerns raised during the discussion. He noted that the Embassy is regularly encourages the GSL to listen to and address the concerns of the Muslim community and to solicit direct input from local communities when making policy decisions, particularly on sensitive issues like land rights.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The roundtable participants seemed eager to share their concerns and appreciative of an audience with the U.S. Embassy. They welcomed U.S. intervention with the GSL to encourage fair treatment of Muslims. For the most part, however, they remained optimistic about relations between Muslims and both Sinhalese and Tamils and confident that Sri Lankan Muslims would remain moderate and peaceful.
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